Tantalizing Hints Dimmed

Letelier Briefcase Opened to Press

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Tantalizing hints of a "Havana connection" and a Helsinki "secret money drop" involving assassinated Chilean exile Orlando Letelier have spilled from his private briefcase into newspaper columns.

Columnists Rowland Evans-Robert Novak and Jack Anderson-Les Whitten have been leaked letters and notes from the black Samsonite briefcase that District of Columbia police and the FBI obtained from the car in which Letelier and Ronni Moffitt were killed by a bomb while they drove along Embassy Row Sept. 21.

Strong [illegible] Letelier's family decided to open the briefcase public for the first time yesterday in the office of Michael Tigar, the lawyer for Letelier's widow.

Tigar said the briefcase had been kept locked in a cabinet in his office since it was returned by the FBI. He said nothing had been removed from it since its return.

The leaks damage Letelier's reputation, distress his friends and family and also appear aimed at damaging Rep. Michael J. Harrington (D-Mass.).

After going through all the contents of the briefcase it appears that the columns have followed the darkest possible interpretation of the scanty material.

The key assumption, possible but unproven by anything in the briefcase, is that Letelier was receiving Cuban government money. Both of the columns made the charge.

This "Havana connection" depends on a May 8, 1975, letter to Letelier from Beatrice Allende, the daughter of Marxist former Chilean President Salvador Allende, who was killed in a right-wing coup in September, 1973.

Letelier was a minister in Allende's government and was imprisoned for a year following the coup. He was a member of the Socialist Party, of which Beatrice Allende is treasurer.

Writing from Havana, where she lives with her Cuban husband, she promised Letelier $1,000 a month to support his work for the party in the United States. She said the payments had been approved by party General Secretary Carlos Altamirano.

The letter does not say where the money was to come from.

Saul Landau, an associate of Letelier at the Institute for Policy Studies here, denied yesterday that the money came from the Cuban government.

The party funds are kept in Western Europe, he said, and are raised in Western Europe and the United States "from church groups, labor unions and social democratic parties."

American Opinion, the magazine of the John Birch Society, and others, however, see Beatrice Allende's husband, Luis Fernandez Ona, as sinister evidence of Cuban involvement. The magazine has identified him as a former head of Cuba's secret police.

After the initial Anderson-Whitten column on the Allende-Letelier letter, Accuracy in Media took out newspaper advertisements attacking major U.S. papers, including The Washington Post, for not pursuing the briefcase revelations. Accuracy in Media is a group that monitors the press for signs of what it considers bias.

The second of the three Beatrice Allende-Letelier letters in the briefcase is a carbon of five typewritten pages he sent to her in Havana March 29, 1976.

Letelier cautioned that it would be best not to mount campaigns for human rights in Chile or disseminate information from there because American liberals would be afraid of a Havana link.

He pointed out that liberals sympathize with the Chilean Socialist position on human rights but not on ideology. In the Evans-Novak column this was summarized as an effort to conceal "world Communist support for his movement."

Letelier ended the letter with a discussion of his fear that Christian Democratic leaders like former President Eduardo Frei might drop their opposition to Chile's military junta and then write:

"Perhaps someday not too far off, we also will be able to do what has been done in Cuba."

Letelier's desire for a social revolution in Chile and his socialist beliefs were well known.

The third Havana letter is from Beatrice Allende to Letelier dated Aug. 20, 1976. It pomised another five months of $1,000-per-month funding and urged him to find additional sources of financial support.

Evans-Novak and an Anderson-Whitten column distributed for today's papers revealed that Harrington had received expense money from Letelier. Anderson Whitten said the money was paid by the Chilean Socialist Party in exile, and Evans-Novak said it was "Cuban expense money," part of the money sent at Beatrice Allende's instruction.

Letelier's expense notes in his briefcase indicate Harrington spent $554.26 on travel to attend a conference in Mexico and was reimbursed $380 by his hosts, the Third Session of the Commission to Inquire into Crimes of the Chilean Military Junta.

The shorthand Letelier used for that body was "Helsinki," the Finnish capital in which the first session was held. Thus the origin of the Evans-Novak secret money drop theory.

Letelier's handwritten note says the difference—$174.26—was reimbursed to Harrington "from my pocket." Other notes show that Letelier counted the $174.26 among the expenses for which he used the money provided by his party.

The "third session" was held in February, 1975, in Mexico City. In her May 8, 1975 letter, Beatrice Allende told Letelier that the "Harrington matter" would be taken care of.

Evans-Novak apparently confuse this conference with another one Harrington attended in November, 1975, in Oaxtepec, Mexico jointly sponsored by the Institute for Policy Studies, where Letelier worked, and a Mexican organization.

Harrington said yesterday that he had always expected that his expenses would be paid by the "third session," which he knew was closely associated with Chile's socialists.

Harrington, a longtime defender of human rights in Chile and critic of the military junta, said attending the conference was a better way to spend time than going to a board meeting of International Telephone and Telegraph Corp. ITT was deeply involved in anti-Allende activity in Chile.

In Harrington's district the Evans-Novak column provoked large headlines, an aide said. The Salem, Mass., paper's read: "Red Cash Goes to Mike Trip."